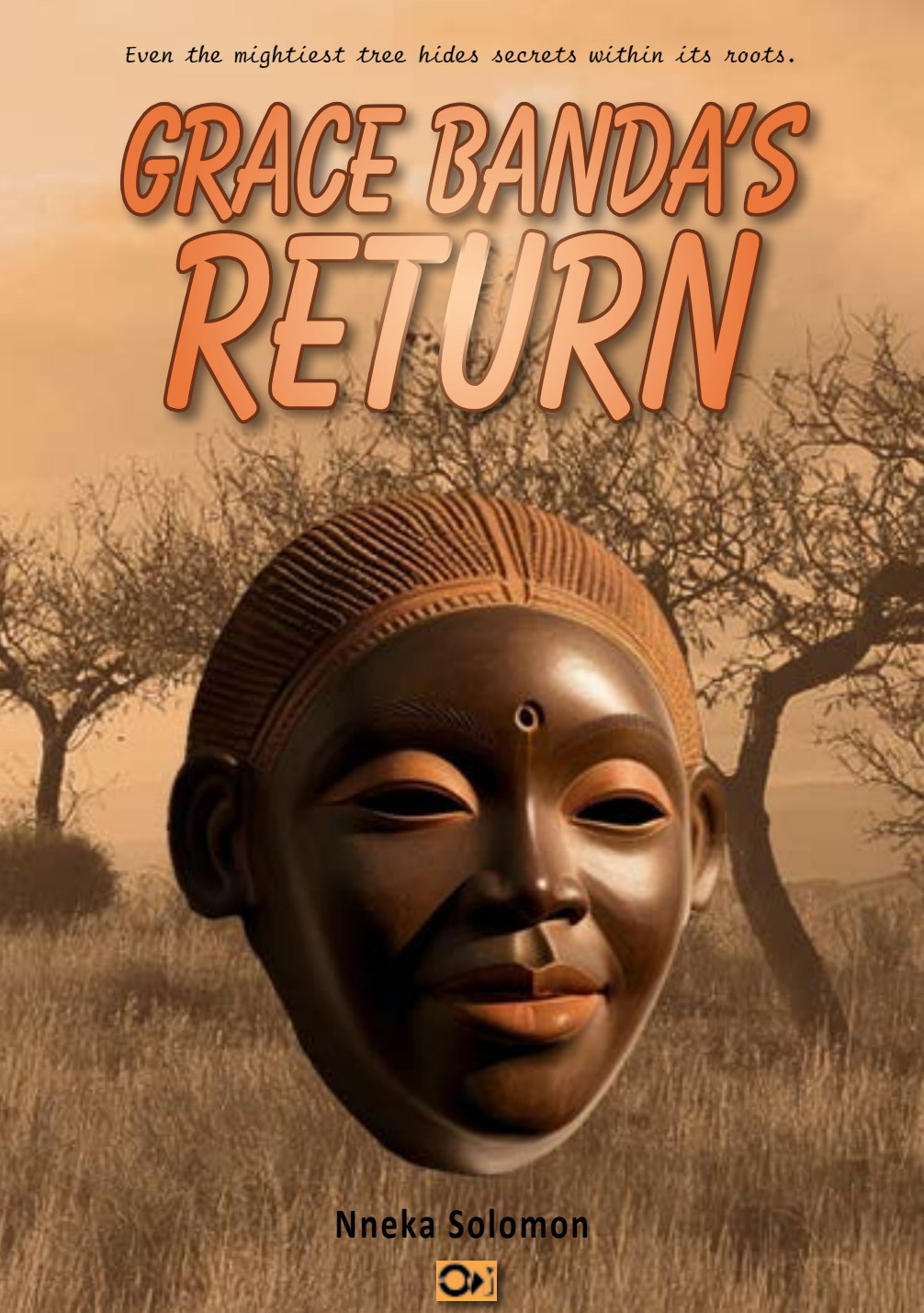
Even the mightiest tree hides secrets within its roots.

GRACE BANDA'S RETURN



Nneka Solomon

An Ovi eBooks Publication

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The heat of the afternoon sun pressed down on the village, turning the dusty paths into molten rivers of red and gold. Grace Banda's bare feet, calloused from years of city streets and new pavements, sank into the fine powder of the earth as she walked. The familiar scent of burning wood from drying maize hung thick in the air, mingling with the sharp tang of sweat and the sharp bitterness of old memories.

Nyasha, her young daughter, trotted beside her, unaware of the weight of time that hung around them like a storm waiting to break. Her voice, light and carefree, rang out in the silence of the road, "Mama, why is the sky so red today?" Her innocent curiosity was a stark contrast to the tension that crackled in the air.

Grace's hand tightened around her daughter's, her skin suddenly clammy. They were close now, so close that Grace could feel the pulse of the village as if it were her own heartbeat. The old baobab tree, its gnarled branches reaching skyward like skeletal hands, stood at the edge of the square. She had loved that tree as a girl, its shade offering solace from the relentless Malawian heat. But today, as she approached it, it felt more like an omen an old friend that had forgotten her, a symbol of the distance that had grown between her and the village she had once called home.

She had left in search of a better life, a dream she thought could outshine the dust and the grinding poverty of the village. In the city, she had built a world of her own, or so she thought, far removed from the clutches of judgment. But now, with Nyasha's small hand in hers, she felt the shadows of the past stretch out before her, thick and suffocating.

With every step closer, Grace's chest tightened. The air grew heavier, charged with unspoken words. Her eyes flickered across the village square, where old men sat on low wooden stools, their hands weathered and dry, their eyes sharp with suspicion. Women gathered in small circles, their hushed voices rising and falling like the murmur of an ominous wind.

"There she is," a voice, thin and brittle, cut through the quiet. Grace's heart faltered. She knew that voice. It belonged to Aunt Mankhamba, who had always been the first to pass judgment.

"Grace Banda. Back from the city," another voice muttered, its tone thick with disdain. "How long has it been? Ten years, is it? Or more?"

An older voice, more gravelly and full of age, added, "If she cared about her mother, she'd have come back before. But now? Now she comes, with her city clothes, like she's too good for us."

Grace's grip tightened on Nyasha's hand, but the girl, still oblivious, skipped along beside her. The words of the villagers pierced her like shards of broken glass. She had heard them all before, whispered in dark corners of the city, murmured under breaths when she had returned home to visit her mother only twice in the past decade. Each rumour, each cruel accusation, had followed her like an unshakable shadow.

She could feel the eyes on her now, sharp, unforgiving. Eyes that once looked upon her with hope, with love, now filled with suspicion and resentment. Their silence was louder than any shouts. They knew

the story. They knew what they believed about Grace. The girl who left. The daughter who abandoned her mother. The woman who had come back with nothing but a daughter and a sense of guilt too heavy to bear.

One woman, leaning heavily on a cane, turned to the group of gossiping elders and spat out a word, "City girl." The phrase was like a curse in the village, heavy with judgment and disdain.

Grace's heart fluttered, a bird trapped in a cage. She had fought for so long to silence the shame that clawed at her every thought. She had worked for her place in the city, built a life of dignity despite the whispers that followed her there, too. But none of that mattered now. None of it would change the village's perception of her. Not after the scandal, not after everything that had happened.

"Don't listen to them, Mama," Nyasha said, her voice filled with innocence. Grace glanced down at her daughter, her bright eyes wide and trusting, and for a moment, the weight of the past seemed to lift, only to crash back down harder.

"It's okay, sweetheart," Grace whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "It's just the way people are some-

times." She bent down to her level and forced a smile, hoping to mask the pain. "We'll make it through, together."

As they reached the heart of the village, Grace's eyes caught a flicker of movement, a figure slipping between the buildings. It was Benson, an old friend from the city, someone who had once walked the same path she had, someone who knew the truth behind her departure.

Benson's eyes locked with hers, and his lips tightened. He was smiling, but it didn't reach his eyes. Grace's pulse quickened. This was it. The moment when everything would come to light, when the past would be dragged from the shadows.

"Grace," he called out, his voice low. "I was wondering when you'd show up. You've got a lot of explaining to do, don't you?"

The words hung in the air like a warning. Grace froze. She could feel the villagers gathering, their ears straining for every word, their hearts eager to hear the confession they had been waiting for. She swallowed hard, but the truth felt like a stone lodged in her throat.

Her life in the city had never been what it seemed. The city had been a sanctuary, yes, but it had also been a cage. A cage built with lies, secrets, and dangerous choices. Now, standing in front of the village, surrounded by eyes full of judgment, Grace had no choice but to face them. To face the truth.

She didn't look at Benson. Instead, she focused on Nyasha, who was now tugging at her sleeve. "Mama, why are they all staring?"

Grace swallowed, forcing herself to breathe. "They're just curious, darling. Just curious."

Benson's voice came again, louder now, cutting through the thickening air. "Curiosity doesn't explain the years, Grace. And it doesn't explain what you left behind."

As Grace turned to face the man who once shared her dreams, she felt the weight of a hundred eyes pressing into her. The past was here, alive, and it was not letting her go.

And somewhere, deep inside, Grace knew that whatever she said next would change everything, if it didn't destroy her first.

I.

The sun sat heavy in the sky, casting long shadows across the village as Grace Banda walked toward the familiar, dusty market square. The sound of chickens clucking, children playing, and the clink of metal pots echoed in the air, but for Grace, there was a strange silence around her, a hush that seemed to follow her every step. It wasn't the kind of quiet she had expected when she decided to return. She had imagined the village welcoming her back with open arms, a homecoming full of smiles and laughter. But now, with each stride, the weight of years she had left behind seemed to press down harder.

"Grace Banda."

The voice cracked through the air like a whip, sharp and brittle, immediately drawing the attention of the small crowd that had gathered in the market. It was Aunt Mankhamba, still as gaunt and stern as Grace

remembered. She stood by the old granary, her arms crossed over her chest, eyes narrowing beneath thick brows.

Grace stopped. Her heart thudded painfully in her chest, but she forced her face to remain unreadable, her hand instinctively tightening around Nyasha's, who was walking beside her, her wide eyes taking in the village with an innocent wonder.

"Yes, Aunt Mankhamba?" Grace said, her voice strained, though she tried to keep it steady.

Aunt Mankhamba sneered, stepping closer, her shoes sinking into the soft earth. "So, you finally decided to come back. After all these years, you show up with your city clothes and your city child. Did you forget where you came from?"

Grace's breath hitched. She had known this moment would come, but it was harder to endure than she had imagined. The bitterness in Aunt Mankhamba's voice made the words feel like stones in her stomach.

"I came back," Grace said, the words carefully measured, "for my daughter. She deserves to know where her roots are."

Aunt Mankhamba's lips curled into a thin, humourless smile. "Roots?" she mocked. "Your roots? You left those behind when you turned your back on your own mother. She passed before the rains came, you know. And you weren't there."

The words landed like a slap, and for a moment, Grace could only stare at the older woman. The image of her mother, frail, whispering with her final breath, flashed before her eyes. She had been there, yes, but in her own way, from afar, sending money, praying, trying to make things right from a distance. But it wasn't enough, not for the village, not for Aunt Mankhamba.

"I know," Grace said, her voice barely above a whisper. She fought the sting of tears in her eyes. "I know."

The air seemed to thicken around them, the gossip spreading like wildfire among the gathering crowd. A few women who had been standing nearby whispered, casting quick, calculating glances in Grace's direction. One woman, older than the rest, shook her head and muttered just loud enough for Grace to hear, "She was always too good for us, wasn't she? Too busy with her city life to care about her mother. Too busy with city men and city money."

A murmur of agreement rippled through the group. Grace could feel the weight of their judgment pressing in on her, but she stood tall, her chest rising and falling with each steadying breath.

"That's not true," she said, her voice shaking but firm. She glanced down at Nyasha, still unaware of the storm gathering around them. The girl skipped a few steps ahead, her tiny hands clutching a bright pink doll, her laughter light as she twirled in circles, her innocence untouched by the venom of the adults. "I had to leave, but I didn't leave her," Grace continued, her voice gaining strength. "I just… I couldn't come back. Not then. I couldn't. I had to work—"

But Aunt Mankhamba cut her off, her voice rising. "Work?" she spat. "Or were you too busy having fun in the city while we all carried the burden? Some of us had to take care of her when you were nowhere to be found!"

The crowd shifted, the whispers now louder, harsher. Grace clenched her fists at her sides, the heat of anger rising within her, but she forced herself to stay calm. She could feel Nyasha's eyes on her, the girl sensing the tension but not yet understanding its meaning. The village felt too small, too suffocating. It felt like the walls were closing in.

She took a deep breath, bending slightly to Nyasha's level, her voice softening. "Don't worry, sweetheart. We're going to be okay. We're home now. This is where you belong."

Nyasha blinked up at her, her face bright with untainted joy. "Are we going to stay here forever, Mama?"

Grace smiled faintly, her heart heavy with the weight of unspoken words. "Yes, my love. Forever."

But Aunt Mankhamba wasn't finished. Her sharp voice cut through the air again, like a blade. "You think this is your home, Grace? You think we're all going to welcome you with open arms? You left your own mother to die alone, and now you expect us to just forget that? You were too busy with your city life, too busy to care about anyone but yourself."

Grace's jaw clenched, the words stinging like salt in a wound. "You don't understand," she said, her voice rising now, frustration bubbling up. "I didn't want to leave! But sometimes, life doesn't give you a choice. I had to survive, Aunt Mankhamba. I had to make a living. And when I did try to come back, when I sent money… you didn't understand either. Nobody here did. It's never been enough."

The old woman's face twisted with disdain, her lips curling into a tight smile. "Survive?" she repeated. "You think your city life was survival? You think your money was enough? Look at you, Grace. Look at what you've become. A stranger in your own land."

Grace stood still, her gaze hardening, but just as she opened her mouth to respond, a small voice broke through the tension.

"Why is everyone so angry, Mama?"

Nyasha stood at her side, her face full of confusion. She tugged gently on Grace's sleeve, unaware of the storm raging around them. Her innocence was a stark contrast to the bitter words that were flung at her mother.

Grace knelt down, her knees sinking into the soft earth, and cupped her daughter's face in her hands. "I'll tell you later, sweetheart. But we're going to be okay. We just need to get through this."

As she straightened up, a man from the crowd stepped forward. He was tall and broad-shouldered, his face lined with years of hard labour and harsh weather. Benson. She had forgotten about him—forgotten how much his presence had meant in the city,

how many times they had stood side by side, surviving together.

He was smiling, but it didn't reach his eyes. His smile was tight, like a mask. And when he spoke, his voice was low, almost conspiratorial. "Grace," he said, his words laced with an edge. "I was wondering when you'd show up. You've got a lot of explaining to do, don't you?"

The words fell into the air, heavy and full of implication, and Grace's heart skipped a beat. She swallowed, but the words felt thick in her throat. There was no escaping what she had done, no hiding from the truth now. The village was waiting, the villagers were listening, and they would judge her, whether she spoke or remained silent.

Benson's eyes flicked to Nyasha, then back to Grace. "I think everyone deserves to hear the whole story, don't you think?"

Grace's stomach turned, her throat dry. The truth, painful and raw was coming. And there would be no turning back.

II.

The days bled into one another like the fading hues of dusk. Grace thought time would smooth the jagged edges of her return, but instead, the village's whispers deepened, thickened, until the air itself seemed to hum with rumours. They clung to her, the villagers' voices heavy with judgment, their eyes always watching, always probing. They were relentless, like the unforgiving sun overhead, scorching and unyielding. The past, once a buried thing, now sprouted and twisted like vines in her mind, suffocating her every thought.

Grace couldn't walk through the marketplace without hearing the murmurs, the faint clicking of tongues. She could feel the weight of their words on her back, like a dark cloud following her every step. At the well, she overheard women gossiping as they filled their buckets, their words sharp as they sliced through the air.

"She's back, and with that city child," one of them said, her voice tinged with disgust. "What does she want now? She abandoned her mother, and now she thinks she can walk back into this village like nothing happened?"

Another woman, younger, but no less venomous, hissed, "She'll never change. She always thought she was too good for us. And now she thinks we've all forgotten what she did."

Grace's throat tightened, and she quickly looked away, pretending not to hear. She drew water from the well, trying to steady her hands, to calm the tempest rising inside her. But it was no use. They were right behind her, those voices, and their weight was heavier than the bucket she carried.

That evening, as the sun set behind the hills and the sky turned the colour of bruised fruit, Grace sat outside her hut, the firelight flickering in her eyes. Nyasha sat next to her, her small hands pressing down on the dirt as she made shapes with the earth. The girl was unaware of the tension suffocating the air, of the glances cast their way whenever they walked through the village. Grace smiled faintly at her, but even that felt like a lie. She could no longer find peace in the quiet moments. Even in her own home, she

was haunted by the gossip, the stares, the whispers.

A sharp voice broke the fragile silence.

"She's back."

Grace turned to see a group of men standing at the edge of the square, their dark silhouettes framed by the setting sun. Their voices were low but laced with venom.

"She's the reason your mother's dead," one man spat, his words like shards of glass.

Grace's breath caught in her throat. The words stung, not because they were new, but because they had not changed. The accusations still rang in her ears, as raw as the day they were first spoken.

"Grace Banda?" another man asked, his voice dripping with disdain. "She thinks she can just waltz back into this village? After everything she did?"

Grace's fists clenched at her sides, the firelight reflecting off her knuckles. She wanted to rise from the ground, march over to them, demand answers, scream at them to stop. But she stayed seated, her body trembling with the effort of not reacting. Confrontation would only fuel the fire, she knew. It would

only make things worse. And there was no telling how far this fire had already spread.

"Let's see how long she stays this time," the first man said, a sneer curling on his lips.

Grace closed her eyes, breathing through the anger that burned in her chest. *They don't understand. None of them do.*

The sound of laughter reached her ears, a child's laughter, bright and untainted. Nyasha. Grace looked at her daughter, her heart aching. Nyasha skipped around the fire, her doll clutched tightly in her hands, unaware of the storm gathering just beyond their small circle. Grace forced a smile, but it felt like a mask. *She deserves to be happy. She deserves to have a place here. But how can I protect her from this?*

And then, the next day, something changed. The shadows that clung to Grace's every step seemed to grow longer, more tangible. As she walked through the marketplace, trying to ignore the eyes on her, she saw him, Benson. He was standing near the butcher's stall, his broad shoulders hunched as he examined a basket of tomatoes. He looked up when he heard her approach, his eyes narrowing in recognition.

"Grace," he called, his voice low but firm. There was a certain heaviness to it, like he knew more than he was letting on. "I heard about your return."

Grace stopped in her tracks, her heart beating faster. She hadn't expected to see Benson again—not here, not now. The last time she had seen him, he was in the city, just another face in the crowd. But now, here he was, back in the village, with that same look of caution in his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

Benson glanced around quickly, his face clouded with something unreadable. "You should know that people are talking. And they're saying things you need to clear up. Things about your departure. Things that are better left unspoken."

Grace felt her stomach twist. She knew what he was talking about, and the dread of it gripped her heart like a vice. The past was creeping back, inching closer with every passing moment. The truth that she had buried so deep, the secret she had kept locked away for years, was threatening to spill out, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

"What things?" she asked, her voice low, her eyes darting around nervously.

"The truth, Grace," Benson said, lowering his voice even further. "The real reason you left the village. It wasn't just for work, was it? People think you were involved in more than that shady deals, things that aren't meant for these simple people to know. If you don't clear it up soon, there may be no place for you here. And it won't just be gossip this time."

Grace's breath caught in her throat. The truth hung in the air between them, thick and heavy. She wanted to deny it, wanted to tell him it wasn't true, but the weight of the past, the secrets she had tried so hard to bury, were suffocating her. She couldn't lie to him. Not anymore.

"I…" She swallowed, her voice trembling. "I didn't want to leave, Benson. But there were things I couldn't change. Things I had to do. And when I tried to come back, when I wanted to..."

Benson raised a hand, silencing her. "It doesn't matter now. The village has already decided. But I wanted you to hear it from me. You need to make things right, Grace. Before it's too late."

The words echoed in her mind long after he had walked away, leaving her standing in the middle of the bustling marketplace, the weight of the world pressing down on her shoulders. She was caught between two worlds, two identities, and the walls of the past were closing in.

The secret was no longer a secret. And soon, everyone would know the truth.

III.

The small church, normally a place of solace, was now a cauldron of simmering tension. The air inside was stifling, the heat of the late afternoon sun pressing down on the thatched roof, turning the room into a furnace. Grace could feel the eyes of the villagers on her, sharp and accusing, like a thousand needles pricking at her skin. She stood in front of them, her heart pounding in her chest, Nyasha's hand gripping hers so tightly that her fingers began to tingle. Her daughter's innocence, her trust, felt like the only anchor in the storm that raged inside her.

It had taken Grace weeks to decide to confront the village, to unearth the painful truth that had been buried for years. But the weight of their judgment had grown unbearable, and she knew there was no other choice but to speak now, to release herself from the suffocating grip of secrecy.

The room fell silent as she stood before the crowd. The wooden pews creaked under the weight of so many eyes, every villager present eager to hear the story they had long speculated about. Grace swallowed hard. *I've lived in silence for too long. I've let them think the worst of me. But today, I will tell them the truth. No more lies, no more hiding.*

"I didn't leave because I wanted to," Grace began, her voice steady but tight with emotion. "I didn't abandon my mother, and I didn't betray anyone. The truth is…" Her voice faltered for just a moment as the memories threatened to break through, but she held them back. "I was running from something much bigger than me. I left because my life in the city wasn't what it seemed. I was in danger, and I had to disappear. I never stopped loving my mother, but I had to protect myself and my future."

There was a long pause, a deep stillness in the room. Grace could feel their eyes boring into her, could sense the shifting of their perceptions. Some of the villagers' faces softened, but others remained hardened, unmoved. Aunt Mankhamba, who had always been the loudest in her condemnation, sat stiffly at the front, her hands folded in her lap, her lips drawn tight.

The silence stretched on, thick and suffocating. Grace's throat was dry, and she fought to keep her voice from shaking. She had come this far, she could not falter now.

"But you weren't the only ones hurt by my leaving," she continued, her gaze sweeping over the villagers. "I've hurt so many of you by not being here. I stayed away because I thought it was the only way to keep you safe, but I can see now that all it did was drive a wedge between us." She took a deep breath. "But I'm here now. And I want to make things right. I can't undo the past, but I can try to fix what I broke."

The words hung in the air, and for a moment, no one moved, no one spoke. It felt as though the world had paused, holding its breath, waiting for the next move. Grace's pulse thundered in her ears as the villagers processed her confession.

Then, from the back of the room, came the voice that Grace had both feared and expected. It was Benson.

"What did you really do, Grace Banda?" His voice was low but firm, cutting through the stillness like a blade. The room seemed to shrink around her as his words landed, heavy and accusing. He stepped forward, his eyes locked onto hers, unreadable.

Grace's heart skipped a beat. She had known this moment was coming, but the weight of it hit her all the same. The truth she had kept buried for so long was finally going to be revealed, and there was no going back. She had to face Benson, face the villagers, face the consequences of her choices.

She turned to him, her voice trembling but resolute. "You think you know what I did, Benson. You think you know the story, but you don't. None of you do." She paused, her chest tightening as the memory of the city, of the things she had done to survive, washed over her. "I had to make deals. I had to protect myself from people who wanted me dead. I was being used, manipulated by forces I couldn't control. And when I finally understood the danger, when I realized what I was caught up in, I had to leave. For good. To get out of the mess I was in."

The villagers shifted uneasily, and Grace could hear the faintest gasps as they absorbed her words. She could feel their judgment, but she no longer cared. She had said it all, the raw truth spilling from her lips.

"You think I abandoned my mother," Grace went on, her voice gaining strength. "But my mother... she was in the grip of something much more dangerous

than I was. I couldn't save her. She didn't want to be saved, not from the things she had done. But I never stopped caring for her, and I never stopped loving her, even if I wasn't here to show it."

Aunt Mankhamba finally stood up, her face twisted in a mixture of anger and disbelief. "And now you think we should just forgive you?" she shouted, her voice ringing in the air. "Just like that? After all these years of silence, of abandonment?"

Grace's jaw tightened, but she held her ground. "No," she said, her voice firm. "I don't expect forgiveness. I don't deserve it. But I'm asking for the chance to show you that I can be better. I'm here, I'm back, and I want to make amends. If you can't forgive me, then at least let me show you who I am now. Who I've become."

For a moment, the room was still again. The weight of her words hung heavy in the air, and Grace felt the shift, the gradual changing of tides. The villagers were no longer united in their hatred of her; now there was division. Some were starting to soften, while others were still hardened by years of resentment.

Then, Benson spoke again, his voice quieter this time. "You didn't just leave the village, Grace. You left

something else behind. A promise. And you broke it."

Her heart skipped. The promise. *How could I have forgotten?*

She closed her eyes, the memory of it flooding back in a rush—her mother's last words, spoken in a fevered delirium, the promise she had made to stay close, to care for her until the end. A promise Grace had failed to keep.

"I didn't mean to break it," Grace whispered, her voice choked. "But I had to protect myself. I had to survive. I couldn't keep the promise I made. I'm sorry. So sorry."

There was a long silence, and then the unexpected happened. Aunt Mankhamba, the one who had been the loudest in her condemnation, stepped forward, her eyes still angry but softened with something else. "It's a hard thing, Grace. To live with the weight of broken promises. But maybe... just maybe... there's a way to rebuild what's been lost."

Grace's heart raced in her chest as the words settled in, as the possibility of redemption, of reconciliation, began to form like a fragile thread between them.

She wasn't sure if it was too late, but it was a start.

As the villagers began to murmur among themselves, Benson remained silent, his gaze never leaving Grace. She could see the conflict in his eyes, the remnants of distrust that still lingered like a storm cloud. The tension between them was palpable, thick and suffocating.

Finally, Benson spoke again, his voice soft but resolute. "I'm not saying we can forget, Grace. I'm not saying we can forgive. But I'll give you a chance. A chance to prove yourself."

The words felt like a weight lifted from her chest, but at the same time, a new weight took its place. The weight of expectation. The weight of redemption. Grace knew this was just the beginning. The road ahead would be long, and the scars of the past would not fade easily. But at least she had been given a chance.

As the crowd began to disperse, Grace stood there, the weight of her words still pressing on her, her body shaking with the adrenaline of the confrontation. She turned to Nyasha, who had been watching quietly, her eyes wide and innocent. Grace knelt down, pulling her close.

"We'll be okay," Grace whispered, though she wasn't sure she believed it. But for the first time in years, she felt a small spark of hope, flickering in the dark.

END

Grace Banda's Return

Nneka Solomon

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Even the mightiest tree hides secrets within its roots.

GRACE BANDA'S RETURN

Nneka Solomon, part-time educator full-time chronicler of small-town life, spends her days navigating the unpredictable waters of academia and her evenings crafting fantastical tales where the local gossip mill becomes a cauldron of magical intrigue and the town square transforms into a bustling marketplace for enchanted wares.

Nneka Solomon